

Statement of Representative James A. Leach
Chairman, Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific
Joint Hearing on Human Rights in Burma
February 7, 2006

Let me express my appreciation to Chairman Smith for his leadership in holding this important hearing on the situation in Burma. Let me also extend a warm welcome to our witnesses, particularly the Burmese freedom activists who so nobly symbolize their country's hope for a better future.

What happens to Burma and to the peoples of this extraordinary country matters deeply to the United States. Broadly speaking, our primary interests are focused on human rights, democracy, refugee assistance, and an end to Burmese production and trafficking of illicit narcotics. However, we also seek to reach out to the Burmese people with humanitarian assistance, including medical aid to help stem the devastating spread of diseases like HIV/AIDS and – I would hope – potential pandemics like the Avian flu.

In addition, there is a regional security dimension. Burma occupies an important strategic crossroads in Asia, sandwiched between China and India, the world's two most populous countries. A stable and democratic Burma is not only less likely to be a source of tension and conflict in the region, but is also more likely to be an asset to our friends in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

The great tragedy of the current circumstance is that after independence Burma was potentially the most prosperous country in Southeast Asia. Today, after more than forty years of military misrule, its economy is in a shambles, health and educational services are in precipitous decline, while its citizens continue to suffer grievous human rights abuses and repression. The dilemma for the U.S. and other outside parties is how to craft the right mix of policies that can best help the people of Burma to move forward toward democracy and national reconciliation, as well as economic and social development.

In this regard, the U.S. government, led by the Department of State, has recently led efforts to address the situation in Burma at the United Nations Security Council on the grounds that the deteriorating situation there, including refugee flows and the drug trade, constitutes a threat to international peace and security. Congress strongly supports this effort. Likewise, it is encouraging that ASEAN has begun to consider new and more activist initiatives to modify the behavior of its most obdurate member state.

As symbolized by the sudden and bizarre decision of the ruling military regime to retreat from the capital in Rangoon to an obscure jungle locale, Burma represents one of our most intractable foreign policy challenges in Asia today. The conundrum is how to influence narrow-minded nationalists who often seem to welcome isolation and who, when it suits their interests, are also able to seek succor from powerful neighbors. Nonetheless, there is no credible alternative for the U.S. at this time but to persevere with principled efforts to free the courageous Aung San Suu Kyi and to help bring democratic governance and national reconciliation to the long-suffering Burmese people.